



The Beacon

Your guiding light for writing and publishing

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Where do book ideas come from?

Many aspiring authors, especially young ones, operate under the misconception that book ideas have to be big ones; that they must span the whole plot and sub-plots if fiction, and the whole subject if nonfiction.

Nothing could be further from the truth. **Often big books grow from miniscule ideas that pique the interest and imagination of a writer who is attuned to the unusual.** Here are some examples that have recently become the foundation for novels-in-progress:

- Young teens spent several years at sea in sailing ships with their fathers, the captains
- Crows can fly upside down and learn to talk
- Time is a river

And for non-fiction books or articles:

- The Olympic flame (it's not what you'd expect)
- Clouds rain liquid methane on Saturn
- Designer dog crates (Thanks, Paul Lima of PWAC).

These flashes of inspiration can strike without warning, so I carry a tiny notebook tucked into my purse everywhere I go. Opening it as I write today, I find the idea for this article; a name that means nothing to me now (!); places to enjoy in Paris that are free and unknown to tourists; a list of amusing differences between Italian and Canadian women; and.... I must stop or I'll give the rest away! Not all ideas produce enough material for a book but might suit an article. Many ideas come while reading—I gave up TV several years ago so I could read more widely.

How do you flesh out these fleeting notions into a book? Reflection/research is key. When and where could this situation occur? What individuals could be involved? How might the fact(s) change them? Writers need to brood on these snippets, sometimes for a long time, before they metamorphose into a full-bodied story.

The art of the "What if...?"

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From the editor's desk

Sometimes, one lucks into a gem. This summer issue looks at two different gems that are inter-related. First, the tiny ideas that form the basis of books or articles; second, the opportunity to sit at the feet of a great writer, Daniel Wood, and hear him talk and teach.

Check into the SFU Summer Publishing Workshops at www.sfu.ca/pubworks if a course or two appeals to you this season. Joyce favours the editing courses and I like those geared to new trends and getting published.

Summer presents other opportunities for writers too. For many it is the time to read more, always essential; for others, summer provides the calm to write up a storm. I am one of the latter because my speaking practice dwindles to nothing from late May until early October.

Whatever you choose for your focus this summer, I hope you derive many ideas and much satisfaction.

Until September,

Julie H. Ferguson

Let's turn to the big picture

By Joyce Gram, writer and editor

Those of you who have faithfully followed my articles here in *The Beacon* will have noticed that I have focused on the minutia of editing—punctuation, verb style, word usage—detail that I said in my inaugural piece makes writing flow, smoothes the reader's way, spares the reader the irritation of interruption and confusion. But minutia, defined by the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* as “a precise, trivial, or minor detail,” is only one part of editing (though it is often the part that makes for the best debate; in fact, the debate can get downright dirty!). Another part is “substantive” or “structural” editing, what I like to call the “Big Picture.”

When an editor looks at structure, she asks herself, Does the structure of the manuscript work as whole, given the nature of the publication? A personal essay or opinion piece for a local newspaper will be structured differently than a short story, website, or how-to book. A letter to the editor cries out for a logical sequence that the reader can grasp in seconds without effort. A novel calls for a compelling sequence that will captivate and hold the reader for many hours. Structural rules are not carved in stone, but readers and publishers have expectations. Whatever your piece, its organization must be easy to follow, without gaps, missing steps, or unclear transitions. Readers look for prose that is clear, concise, and a pleasure to read. Few will backtrack to figure out your argument or make sense of what your characters are doing. What matters most is a structure that, combined with all the other elements of good writing, draws your reader right to the last sentence.

In my last piece, I promised to let you know the outcome of the West Coast Editor's survey on the serial comma. Final results: for – 84.3%; against – 12.7%; it doesn't matter – 1.5%; only as required – 1%; I abstain – 1%. Let's hear it for the serial comma!

Recommended resource on substantive editing: Editors' Association of Canada Professional Editorial Standards. Available at:

http://www.editors.ca/resources/eac_publications/pes/index.html

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Winter/spring events for Writers

(for additions, visit www.beaconlit.com/schedule2008.htm regularly)

Oct 24-26 - Surrey International Writers' Conference. www.siwcc.ca. Registration begins mid-July and closes when it is sold out. Register early!



Oct 28 - Your Road Map to Self-publishing Family Memory Books, Histories, and Travel Memoirs, etc. Learn the most direct route to your destination, locate points of interest, avoid dead ends, and prepare to have fun on the way. Creative Writing Diploma Program, Guildford Park Secondary, Surrey, 7-9:30pm. (To be confirmed.) Register at www.ce.sd36.bc.ca/ after Labour Day.

Nov 1 - Book Magic: Turning Writers into Published Authors (9am to noon) and **Crafting Irresistible Query Letters** (1-4pm) for all fiction and non-fiction writers (unsuitable for poets and screenwriters) who want to learn more about getting their books published. VCC downtown campus. Register at www.vcc.ca/programs/pceprograms.cfm after Labour Day

Nov 29 - Book Magic: Turning Writers into Published Authors for all novelists and non-fiction writers (unsuitable for poets and screenwriters) who want to discover their next steps towards getting published in Canada.. Creative Writing Diploma Program, Johnston Heights Secondary School, Surrey, 9am-4pm. (To be confirmed.) Register at www.ce.sd36.bc.ca/ after Labour Day.

Dec 6 - Self-editing for Writers, Creative Writing Diploma Program, Johnston Heights Secondary, Surrey, 9am-4pm. (To be confirmed.) Register [here](#) after Labour Day.

At the feet of Daniel Wood

Daniel Wood, award-winning freelancer, changed a lot of minds at the Powell River Festival of Writers (April 08) when he said magazines pay writers better than books. On average, one print mag needs 200 pieces, long and short, every year and uses some freelancers to meet that goal. Thus income from magazine articles can be more regular than book royalties. And, he said there's room for everyone.

Wood, who teaches writing as well as doing it himself, reminded us that article ideas only come alive with story—people doing, feeling, seeing, etc. He advises opening a piece on an issue with a sequence of dramatic scenes filled with strong characters and motivations, and the use of dialogue. After that the writer can pull back and look at the issue through a wide-angle lens, and may (but not always) explicitly state the problem. Then, and only then, should the writer discuss what is being done about the issue and what more is needed. Wood says we should end with another riveting individual's close-up.

Sound familiar? It should—this is what creative nonfiction is all about, employing fiction techniques to make nonfiction engage and move the reader.

More “Wood Wisdom” at the blog below.

Please visit *The Beacon* blog at:
www.beaconlit.blogspot.com

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